

On the Tension in Kate Chopin's *Desiree's Baby*

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Kate Chopin's famous short story *Desiree's Baby* attracts a large number of readers with its dramatic ending and thematic implication. The love and hate of Armand, the sharp contrast between L'Abri manor and Valmonde plantation and the twists and turns of the plot form the tension beauty of this story. In order to further explore *Desiree's Baby*, this paper interprets the emotional tension, image tension and plot tension in the short story. It further explores the thematic implication and artistic beauty of the novel, and reveals Chopin's criticism of racism.

Keywords: desiree's baby, emotional tension, image tension, plot tension

Introduction

Kate Chopin is the first generation of American female writers engaged in "women's literature". In addition to female issues, Chopin's works also deal with racial issues, and the short story *Desiree's Baby* is one of such a novel. Critic Oneidas R. Whipple called it "one of the most perfect short stories ever written" (Jin, 2004, p. 377). However, there are only a few research papers on this short story at home and abroad, which interpret it mainly from the perspective of mythological archetype, racial politics, gender politics. This paper makes a further study of the story from the perspective of tension, a concept of New Criticism, to provide new reference for readers to study this literary work.

"Tension" was proposed by the American poet and literary critic Alan Tate, and later became the standard for the New Criticism to evaluate poetry and poets. Tate believed that "the meaning of a poem is its tension, which is an organic whole composed of all the denotation and connotation contained in the poem" (Zhu, 2006, p. 84). This concept was later extended by other members of the New Criticism to become a general term for the dialectical structure of opposites and unity in the texts. After a close reading of *Desiree's Baby*, it can be found that the text contains some tension structures. Therefore, this paper explores the tension in *Desiree's Baby* from the aspects of emotional tension, image tension and plot tension, and further reveal Chopin's criticism of the prevailing racism at that time and her call for racial equality.

Emotional Tension

Armand's love and hate for Desiree form the emotional tension. Armand fell in love with Desiree in a sudden. "The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles" (Chopin, 1976, p. 189). From then on, he seldom took on a scowling expression because love enveloped him in happiness. His love for Desiree

intensified after Desiree gave birth to their baby, which made Armand consider himself the proudest father in the parish. Moreover, his imperious character had softened so much that he never punished any slave. It's clear that Armand's love for Desiree was so fervent that he can even change himself for her.

However, Armand's love for Desiree took a sudden turn when he found the mixed-race identity of his baby. He began to neglect Desiree and the baby, which made Desiree miserable enough to die. Besides, his temper got worse, and "the spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealing with the slaves" (Chopin, 1976, p. 192). It can be seen that the love that had softened Armand's bad temper disappeared. The reason why Armand snubbed Desiree turned to be that their baby was not white, and Desiree was accordingly not white. Although the interracial relationship between black and white races had a long history, the white racists, out of fear of miscegenation, arbitrarily implemented the "one drop of blood" principle and identified people with even one drop of black blood as black people, even though "a person who looked white but had a drop of black blood would be labeled as black" (Peel, 1990, p. 227). Armand, who was deeply poisoned by racism, thought that his mixed-race baby represented an inferior race and was a disgrace to his noble family. Therefore, he developed a hatred for his baby and his wife.

Armand's emotional tension implies that his racial discrimination is so deep-rooted that even love cannot change it. Although Desiree proved to Armand that she was white, Armand still thought Desiree was not pure white just because of their baby's mixed-race identity and Desiree's obscure origin. To save his family from shame, he was determined to abandon his once beloved wife and baby. It's clear that Armand's mind and behavior were deeply controlled by racism. On the one hand, he was himself a victim of racism. On the other hand, he further implemented the racist system and treated nonwhites cruelly.

Image Tension

L'Abri manor and Valmonde plantation form the image tension in this short story, representing hell and Garden of Eden respectively. Kate Chopin did not directly describe Valmonde plantation, but the harmony and tranquility there can still be perceived. Valmonde plantation is like a Garden of Eden where Desiree was raised. No one really knew baby Desiree's origin, as if she had been sent to Valmonde from heaven. The kindhearted Valmonde couple gave her parental care. Desiree's transformation from an abandoned baby to a graceful lady in the utopian world of Valmonde, coupled with the noble morality of the Valmonde couple, are enough to reveal the harmonious and peaceful life in Valmonde plantation. After Desiree was presumed to be of black origin and abandoned by her husband, Madame Valmonde once again accepted the so-called mixed-race Desiree and baby without complaint. Valmonde Manor is certainly a Garden of Eden, where life is of peace and harmony without racial prejudice.

L'Abri manor stands in stark contrast to Valmonde, symbolizing the hell of slavery and racism. L'Abri was depicted through Madame Valmonde's sight: "When she reached L'Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad looking place.....The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall" (Chopin, 1976, p. 190). L'Abri manor, shrouded in the shadow of death, has a Gothic style, giving people a sense of spookiness, and its black appearance just fits Armand's character. The young Armand imposed very strict rules, "under it his negroes had forgotten how to be

gay” (Chopin, 1976, p. 190). In appearance, L’Abri manor was black, yellow, and gray, which corresponds to the black slaves and their mixed-race descendants living there. Living at L’Abri was like living in a ghastly coffin. “Armand’s attitude to slaves reinforces the death metaphor of L’Abri as ‘hell’” (Dong, 2021, p. 53).

The image tension between Valmonde and L’Abri highlights the theme of the short story, namely the inhumanity and injustice of slavery and racism. The hell image of L’Abri conveys Chopin’s sympathy for slaves and criticism of racism. In addition, Chopin’s portrayal of Valmonde plantation also expresses her call for racial equality, hoping that all communities could become a Garden of Eden where different races can live together in harmony.

Plot Tension

The plot tension is reflected in Armand and Desiree’s marriage which changed from a happy marriage to be a broken one and ended with the death of Desiree and her baby. Armand used to love Desiree so passionately that he even didn’t care her class and origin, thinking that “What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana?” (Chopin, 1976, p. 189). For their wedding, he procured presents to Desiree from Paris. “France was a country of freedom and romance. It was also where Armand was born and grew up. These gifts bore his true love for his bride” (Hao, 2016, p. 66). Desiree also loved Armand desperately. They had been living in happiness from the beginning of the short story.

However, their happy marriage didn’t last long. When their baby was three months old, the plot took a sudden turn and the once happy marriage began to break. “Desiree awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace” (Chopin, 1976, p. 191). She could feel that Armand’s love has gone. Her husband, who had been doubly fond of her because she had given birth to their baby, began to ignore her and their son, and he became cruel to the slaves again. He even ruthlessly let his once proud wife and child leave. Therefore, the desperate Desiree lost the last hope of life and decided to drown herself and her baby in the lake.

The plot tension can also be viewed in the revelation of Armand’s mixed-race identity. When his son showed the characteristics of black people, Armand mistakenly thought that the nameless Desiree should be blamed. In his mind, a black woman was completely unqualified to be loved by a white man. In addition, there were unexpected visits from far-off neighbors. Desiree understood they “were merely to confirm their suspicions, to look down upon Desiree and the poor baby” (Li, 2012, p. 463). Desiree not only could not bear the indifference and contempt of Armand and the neighbors, but also could not accept her own mixed-race identity, so she chose to commit suicide with her child. However, there is a surprising secret at the end of the story: it turned out that Armand was the mixed-race one because his mother was of black race. “In this way Chopin ‘subverted’ the whole story to an unexpected, shocking and resonant artistic effect, which is indeed similar to the usual ‘surprising ending’ of O Henry’s novels” (Chen, 2010, p. 5).

Conclusion

Kate Chopin’s short story *Desiree’s Baby* talks about a tragedy under racism. Armand and Desiree’s tragedy reflects the misery of both whites and non-whites living under the oppression of racism. Chopin succeeds in shaping the emotional tension, image tension and plot tension in the short story, which not only enriches the thematic connotation of this work, but also better reveals Chopin’s criticism of racism.

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